

Chicago Tribune, August 1, 2007

Rebuffing bipartisan pressure from members of Congress, the Bush administration's top environmental regulator on Tuesday declined to stop the BP refinery in northwest Indiana from dumping more pollution into Lake Michigan.

Stephen Johnson, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said he saw nothing wrong with the permit Indiana regulators awarded in June to BP, the first company in years allowed to increase the amount of toxic chemicals pumped into the Great Lakes.

As part of a \$3 billion expansion of its Whiting, Ind., refinery, the nation's fourth largest, BP won permission to release more ammonia and suspended solids into the lake. Indiana regulators also gave BP until 2012 to meet a stringent federal standard for mercury pollution set by the EPA in 1995.

Even though the federal government has been pushing for more than three decades to eliminate pollution in the Great Lakes, the EPA did not object to the BP permit.

"We want to work collaboratively with companies, including BP and others, to do what we can to continue to improve the condition of the Great Lakes," Johnson told the Tribune in a brief interview following a speech at the Chicago Cultural Center. "In this case, it's my understanding that Indiana issued a permit that is fully compliant with the Clean Water Act. As an agency we need to honor that permit."

Last week, the House of Representatives voted 387-26 to approve a resolution urging Indiana to reconsider the permit. A coalition of lawmakers also implored Johnson to put the permit on hold while BP considers additional upgrades at the refinery.

Among other things, the lawmakers demanded to know why EPA officials signed off on the permit when the Clean Water Act prohibits any decline in water quality, even when limits on

pollution discharges are met.

"The administrator's comments aren't surprising, but they are unacceptable," said U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, one of several lawmakers threatening to punish BP in pending legislation unless the company finds a way to reduce pollution from its refinery.

The discharge amounts allowed under BP's new permit are at or below federal guidelines. But the 1,584 pounds of ammonia BP will be allowed to release into the lake every day is an increase of 54 percent above its previous limit. It also will be allowed to dump up to 4,925 pounds of suspended solids, tiny sludge particles that escape water treatment filters. That is a 35 percent increase.

Moreover, Indiana exempted BP from meeting stringent mercury limits for at least the next five years. The refinery currently releases 2 pounds of the toxic metal into the lake every year, according to federal records. If the strict standard was met, the refinery's discharge would be reduced to 8/100ths of a pound.

BP officials and Indiana regulators contend the refinery's wastewater poses no threat to people or aquatic life. They also say they did everything they could to keep more pollution out of the lake.

Asked how the BP permit squares with the EPA's repeatedly stated goal of "virtually eliminating" pollution in the Great Lakes, the world's largest body of fresh surface water, Johnson noted the agency spends hundreds of thousands of dollars every year cleaning up polluted sites around the lakes. "We have a lot of activities going on in the Great Lakes beyond that permit," he said.

Three years ago, BP was one of a half-dozen companies that settled an EPA complaint by agreeing to pay a combined \$56 million to clean up the Grand Calumet River and Indiana Harbor and Ship Canal, heavily industrialized waterways that each year wash millions of pounds of contaminated muck into Lake Michigan.

Lawmakers and other critics question why the EPA is allowing BP to increase the amount of

pollution it puts into the lake even as the agency addresses years of past contamination.

"Years of accelerated pollution from BP will create another problem in the future," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk. "We need to prevent that."

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines.